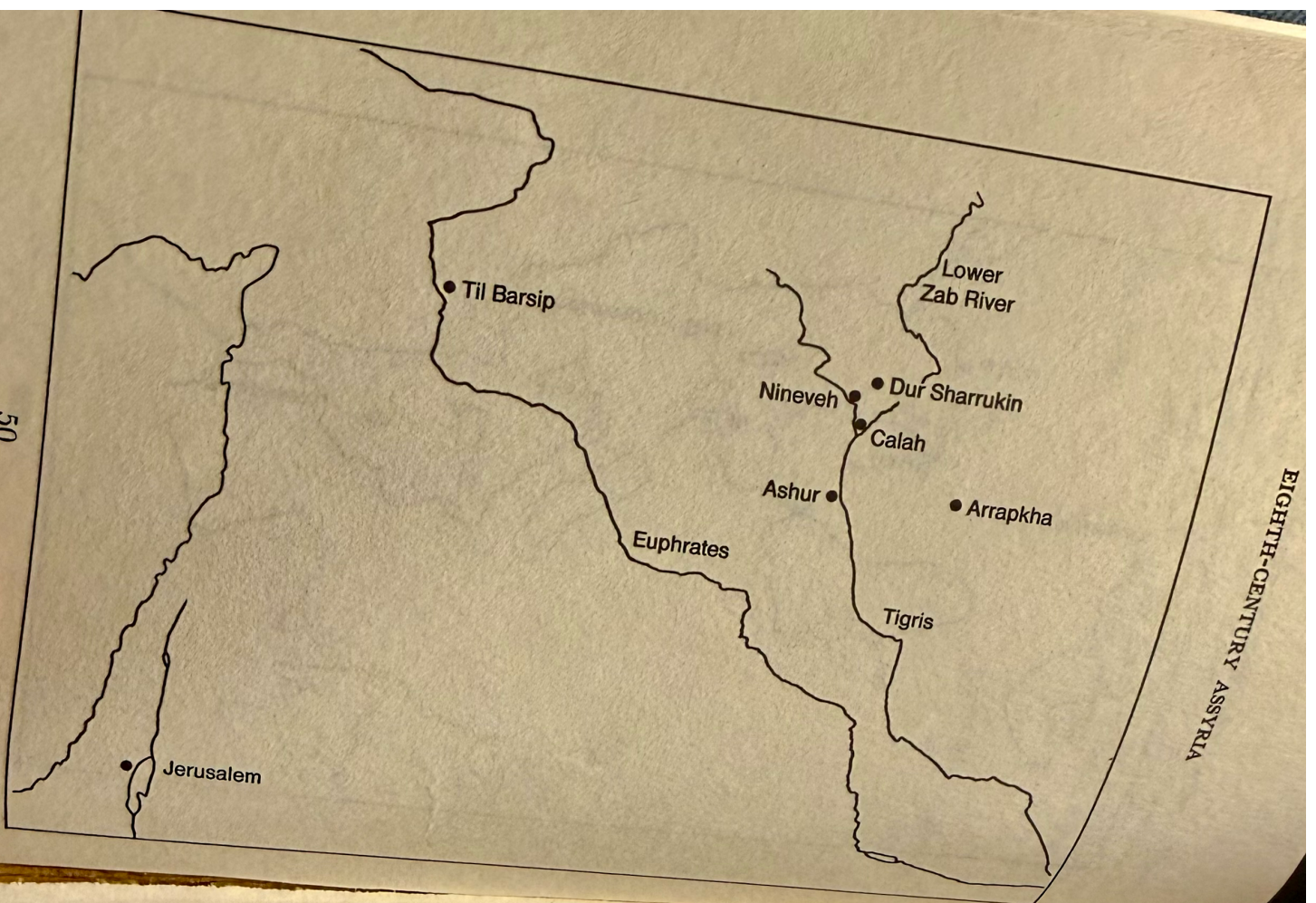




INTRODUCTION

The book of Jonah is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of biblical literature. The account of Jonah's dramatic attempt to escape from God's presence by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish, only to be thwarted by a raging storm and returned to land incarcerated within a great fish, is possibly one of the best-known stories in the Bible. With its unexpected twists and turns the plot successfully retains our attention throughout. Superfluous details are omitted, and the text abounds in word-plays and other compositional techniques. Everything indicates that it has been composed by an author who has used his literary skills to the full.

I. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

In common with a number of other books in the Minor Prophets (*e.g.* Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk), Jonah contains no precise statement as to when the events recorded actually occurred. An important clue to the timing of these, however, is the name 'Jonah son of Amittai' (1:1). Significantly, 2 Kings 14:25 refers to a prophet of the same name, who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (782/81–753 BC),¹ and it is reasonable to suppose that these two passages refer to the same person. This being so, we may date the events underlying the book to the eighth century BC.

Although we can place Jonah's mission to Nineveh within the historical context of the eighth century BC, we are still a long way from determining the date and authorship of the book. Two difficulties confront us. Firstly, the Old Testament itself contains no specific details regarding the book's author or

¹ Throughout this commentary on Jonah, the dates of the kings of Israel and Assyria are those adopted in the *JBD*. These reflect but one of a number of possible chronologies. For a similar, but not quite identical approach, see N. Na'aman, 'Historical and Chronological Notes on the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the Eighth Century B.C.', *VT* 36 (1986), pp. 71–92.

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date of writing. As it stands the book of Jonah is a completely anonymous and undated work. Secondly, although the events described pertain to the eighth century BC, it is quite possible that the book itself may have been composed much later. Indeed some scholars have even suggested a date of composition as late as the third century BC. This represents the latest possible date, because the book's existence is clearly presupposed by a statement in Ecclesiastics 49:10, written shortly after 200 BC, which refers to 'the twelve prophets'. Proposals for dating the composition of the book are clearly across the entire period 800 to 200 BC. However, the majority of recent writers now favour a date after the exile, in the fifth or fourth centuries BC, on the basis of two main arguments.

A. Linguistic features

Of the various criteria for dating Jonah the linguistic features of the text are generally thought to be the most reliable. It is argued, not only has expressions which are more typical of late biblical Hebrew, but it also contains lexical and grammatical forms of Aramaic origin. Together these factors support strongly a post-exilic date, a time when the Hebrew language was heavily influenced by Aramaic.

The whole question of recognizing different stages in the development of biblical Hebrew and of identifying Aramaic influence is extremely complex.² Also our knowledge of ancient Near Eastern languages and dialects is ever increasing, especially as new textual evidence is constantly being brought

¹ Whether or not the fourth/third century BC book of Tobit originally referred to Jonah is uncertain. One important ancient manuscript, Codex S (Sinaiticus), reads 'Jonah' in Tobit 14:4, 8 (cf. RSV Apocrypha). However, another equally important manuscript, Codex B (Vaticanus), contains reference to Jonah; rather the prophet Nahum is mentioned in 14:4 (cf. JB).
² For the benefit of general readers, the presentation of the linguistic arguments has been greatly simplified. For those wishing to pursue the matter in detail, the following works may be consulted: E. Kautzsch, *Die Aramäer in Allen Testament* (Niemeyer, Halle, 1902); M. Wagner, *Die Aramäer in grammatisch-lexikonischen Aramäismen im alttestamentlichen Hebräisch*, BZAW 96 (Töpelmann, 1966); R. Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 12 (Scholars Press, 1976).
Hurvitz, 'The Chronological Significance of "Aramaisms" in Biblical Hebrew', *IEJ* 18 (1968), pp. 234-240.

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light through the activities of archaeologists. Consequently the results of older studies are continually being modified and to some extent corrected.

Among recent writers on Jonah, O. Loretz pioneered the idea that certain features of the book normally designated as 'Aramaic' may in fact reflect Canaanite-Phoenician influence, and hence need not indicate a post-exilic date.¹ To Loretz, it seemed likely that the nouns *mallāh*, 'sailor' (1:5), *šēfīnāh*, 'ship' (1:5), and *ribbō*, 'ten thousand' (4:11), and the particle *šē*, 'which' (1:7; 4:10), found their way into Hebrew via Phoenician, rather than through Aramaic. Although Loretz accounted further investigations.

By far the fullest and most detailed study on the dating of the language of Jonah is that of G. M. Landes.² In this Landes considers not only supposed Aramaisms but also other datable linguistic features. He agrees with Loretz that the terms *mallāh*, *šē*, *ribbō*, and possibly also *šēfīnāh*, may have been borrowed from Phoenician. Of the remaining Aramaisms Landes concludes that, with the exception of *yīl'āššēl*, 'he will consider' (1:6), not one belongs exclusively to the post-exilic age.³ However, the fact that Jonah 1:6 is the sole biblical occurrence of the verb *yīl'āššēl* raises doubts as to its significance for dating purposes.

Landes also examines a number of special word usages thought to be characteristic of late biblical Hebrew.⁴ However, of these only one actually supports a late date. Following A.

¹ O. Loretz, 'Herkunft und Sinn der Jonah-Erzählung', *BZ* 5 (1961), pp. 18-29.
² G. M. Landes, 'Linguistic Criteria and the Date of the Book of Jonah', *Exegetical* 16 (1982), pp. 147-170.

³ In this category Landes places the following words and expressions: *šēq*, 'to be calm' (1:11-12); *zēp*, 'to rage' (1:15); the Piel of *mlk*, 'to appoint' (2:1 Heb., 1:17 EVV; 4:6-8); *mr*, with the specific meaning 'to command' (2:11 Heb., 2:10 EVV); *qdm*, 'to do for the first time' (4:2); *hws*, 'to have pity' (4:10-11); *qy' h*, 'proclamation' (3:2); *lhy hšmym*, 'God of heaven' (1:9); *f'm*, 'deceit' (3:7); the use of the preposition *l*, 'to', as a *nōla accusatīva* particle (2:11 Heb., 2:10 EVV; 4:6). On the expression 'God of heaven', see B. Porten, 'Baashman and the Date of the Book of Jonah', in M. Carrez, J. Doré, P. Grelot (eds.), *De la Torah au Messie* (Desclée, 1981), pp. 237-244.

⁴ He lists seven in all: *q' l*, 'to proclaim against', and *q' l*, 'to proclaim to' (1:2; 3:2); the hiph'il of the root *fwl*, 'to cast' (1:4-5, 12, 15); *rb hphl*, 'captain' (1:6); *mlk*, 'journey' (3:3-4); two instances of 'diachronic chiasmus': *mgdltm w' d qdm*, 'from the greatest to the least' (3:5) and *l'mn w' l'mn*, 'gracious and compassionate' (4:2); *wy' l*, 'to displease' (4:1); *l'mgt*, 'the next day' (4:7).

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Brenner,¹ Landes accepts that the word order in the expression *hamin w'rahim*, 'gracious and compassionate' (4:2), reflects a later usage; early Hebrew is characterized by the reverse order.² However, even if one accepts that the expression there is no compelling reason to date the transition from one century date to the other to the fifth century BC. A sixth- or seventh-century date would also be feasible. Finally, Landes evaluates the text of Jonah against an index compiled by R. Polzin, of grammatical syntactic features, the attaching of late biblical Hebrew.³ As a result, two additional features are reckoned by Landes to indicate a late date: (1) the use of the plural term *gōrālōt*, 'lots' (1:7), is hardly decisive for determining the date of Jonah. Apart from Jonah 1:7 and Leviticus 16:8 the plural form *gōrālōt* is found elsewhere only in post-exilic writings (e.g. 1 Ch. 24:5; Ne. 11:1). To explain the use of the plural in Leviticus 16:8 Landes notes that the passage refers specifically to two lots. Yet, given that the Hebrews, as is the case elsewhere in the pre-exilic literature, is it not possible that the present use of *gōrālōt* is determined by pagan rather than post-exilic practice? Unfortunately Landes overlooks this possibility.

Whereas Landes finds little to support a post-exilic date for Jonah, he observes that other features of the language indicate a pre-exilic date. One of these is the form of the Hebrew preposition *min*, 'from', before anarthrous nouns (i.e. nouns without the definite article). Whereas in post-exilic Hebrew the preposition normally takes the shorter form *mi*, all ten occurrences in Jonah have *min*. Another possible indication of a pre-exilic date is the combination of the particle *šē*, 'which', with the noun *bin*, 'son', in 4:11. Landes believes that this particular expression is not only another example of Phoeni-

¹ A. Brenner, 'The Language of Jonah as an Index to its Date', *Beth Mikra* 79 (1979), pp. 396-405 (in Hebrew). However, note also the response of E. Oimron, 'The Language of Jonah', *Beth Mikra* 81 (1980), pp. 181-182 (in Hebrew).
² Cf. Ex. 34:6; Ps. 86:15; 103:8.

³ Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew*.

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influence, but 'could well represent a North Israelite-Ephraimite dialect feature'.¹ Indeed, although our present knowledge of Hebrew dialects is very limited, it may well be that the linguistic peculiarities of Jonah are indicative not of a late date but of a north Israelite dialect of Jerusalem.² That the date differed from the classical Hebrew of the text respects the linguistic criteria for dating Jonah to the post-exilic period are inconclusive, and certain features of the text. Because the linguistic criteria for dating Jonah to the post-exilic period are inconclusive, Landes inclines to suggest a sixth-century date for the composition of Jonah.³ Our analysis of the evidence, however, indicates that there are fewer reasons for maintaining a late date than even Landes allows. It is, therefore, not inconceivable that the book of Jonah could have been written prior to the sixth century, possibly even in the eighth century BC, especially if one envisages a north Israelite provenance.⁴

B. *Legendary descriptions*

A second argument for the late dating of Jonah arises from the fact that the narrative is deemed to contain a number of elements which are historically inaccurate. On two separate counts these suggest a late date of composition. First, the author of Jonah must have penned his material well after the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC, at a time when knowledge of the city was influenced largely by legendary descriptions. Thus it is maintained that the exaggerated size of the city ('a visit required three days', 3:3) and of its population ('a hundred and twenty thousand people', 4:11) is the product of

¹ Landes, 'Linguistic Criteria', p. 153.

² Various writers have indicated the possibility that the language of Jonah represents a northern dialect: C. F. Kel, p. 381; S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (T. & T. Clark, 1913), p. 322; I. H. Ebers, 'The Purpose of the Book of Jonah', *Theologica Evangelica* 4 (1911), pp. 216-217, 219, n. 26. For a recent study on dialects in Syria-Palestine, see W. R. Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine 1000-586 B.C.E.* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985). No attempt is made, however, to identify different dialects within the Hebrew Bible.

³ Brenner, 'The language of Jonah', reaches a similar conclusion.

⁴ With the capture of Samaria in 723/2 BC by the Assyrian king Sargon II, the northern kingdom of Israel became an Assyrian province. Most of the population were deported to Assyria and replaced by peoples from elsewhere (cf. 2 Ki. 17:23-24). Thus if the book of Jonah originated in the north, it would seem necessary to assume that it was composed prior to 723/2 BC, or soon after.

later popular tradition rather than historical fact. A position is adopted concerning the title 'king of Nineveh' 3:3 that 'Nineveh was a very important city'. Also the comment in the implication that at the time of writing it was no longer so, the Persian period (late sixth century to fourth century bc), but apparently unknown in eighth-century Assyria: (1) the issuing of a decree by both the king and his nobles (3:7) and (2) the participation of animals in a religious fast (3:7-8), the basis of these observations recent writers tend to favour a post-exilic date of composition.

a. *The size of Nineveh.* The description of Nineveh as a city of 'three days' journey' (RSV) *maḥlaḳ š'lošet yāmim* (3:3), has been viewed by many commentators as a gross exaggeration of its size. On the assumption that a day's journey was approximately twenty miles, this would make Nineveh either sixty miles wide, or possibly sixty miles in circumference.¹ We know, however, from a contemporary document that the early seventh-century Assyrian king Sennacherib (704-681 bc) enlarged the circumference of the city of Nineveh from 9300 cubits (approximately three miles) to 21,815 cubits (approximately seven miles),² and modern archaeological surveys confirm the basic accuracy of this report.³ Thus prior to the end of the eighth century Nineveh was probably no more than a mile across at its widest part. On this reckoning, one would hardly have required three days either to traverse the city or to circumambulate its walls.

Various proposals have been made to overcome this difficulty. It has been suggested that the expression 'three days' journey' refers not to the *length* of Jonah's journey, but rather to the *time* required to undertake it. If Jonah was to declare God's message to the Ninevites, he must have gone from

¹ There is no indication in ancient documents, however, of the size of any city being determined by its circumference: 'I do not know of any description of the size of an ancient city by the circuit of its walls,' D. J. Wiseman, *Jonah's Nineveh*, *JyMB* 30 (1979), p. 37.

² Taking one cubit to equal approximately 50 cms or 19.6 ins.

³ F. Jones, 'The Topography of Nineveh', *JRAS* 15 (1855), p. 324, gives a circumference of 7.5 miles; T. Madhloun, 'Excavations at Nineveh', *Sumer* 23 (1967), p. 77, estimates the circumference of the city to be 12 km. (7.4 miles).

street corner to street corner and from city gate to city gate. Naturally, such a task would require several days to complete. Alternatively, D. J. Wiseman has suggested that, in accordance with the ancient Near Eastern practice of hospitality, 'three days' journey could refer to the day of arrival in the city, followed by the customary day of visiting, business and rest, then the day of departure.¹ One factor weighs against both of these proposals, however: the expression 'three days' journey' clearly refers in 3:3 to the size of Nineveh, and not to the time allotted for Jonah's mission.² A third solution has been to view the reference to three days as merely symbolic, signifying a city of gigantic proportions.³ The comment, however, that 'Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey' (3:4, RSV) favours a literal interpretation of the phrase 'three days' journey'.

A quite different approach is to understand the name Nineveh as applying to a much larger district. According to A. Parrot, Nineveh designates the 'Assyrian triangle', the region between the rivers Tigris, Zab and Ghazir, extending from Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad) in the north to Calah (Nimrud) in the south.⁴ Yet although this approach resolves the problem of the 'three days' journey', the text of Jonah describes Nineveh as a 'city', *ir*, and Jonah is portrayed as going and sitting down outside it (4:5). For these reasons it is objected that there are insufficient grounds for believing that the name 'Nineveh' actually designated a much wider area.

The narrative, however, contains one other element which favours the suggestion that the term Nineveh covers a broader region than just the city itself. This is the phrase 'the great city', *hā'ir hagg'dōlāh* (1:2; 3:2; 4:11). Significantly, this very same expression occurs in connection with Nineveh in Genesis

¹ Wiseman, *Jonah's Nineveh*, p. 38; cf. NIV, 'a very important city — a visit required three days'.

² Wiseman's reference to the use of *maḥlaḳ* in Ne. 2:6 (p. 36) is hardly sufficient to overcome this objection; cf. Rudolph, p. 355, n. 2.

³ Cohn, p. 58; Wolff (1975), p. 50.

⁴ A. Parrot, *Nineveh and the Old Testament*, *Studies in Biblical Archaeology* 3 (SCM Press, 1955) pp. 85-86; translated by B. E. Hooke from *Nineveh et l'Ancien Testament* (Delachaux et Niestlé, 21955); cf. C. F. Keil, pp. 390-391; Trübner, pp. 175-176; D. W. B. Robinson, *Jonah*, in *NBC*, p. 750; Maier, p. 62. Wiseman, *Jonah's Nineveh*, p. 38, extends this area to include the city of Assur to the south of Calah.

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10:11-12: 'From that land he [Nimrod] went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city [hā'ir hagg'dolāh]. Commenting on this passage C. F. Keil remarks it follows that the four places formed a large composite city, a large range of towns, to which the name of the (well-known) great city of *Nineveh* was applied, in distinction from *Nineveh* in the more restricted sense, with which Nimrod probably connected the other three places so as to form one great capital, possibly also the chief fortress of his kingdom on the Tigris.¹

If Keil's interpretation of Genesis 10:11-12 is accurate, then the expression 'the great city of *Nineveh*' may well designate not only the walled city of *Nineveh*, but also the surrounding region. Indeed, the phrase may even have been understood in a semi-technical sense, meaning 'Greater *Nineveh*'.² *Jonah* was thus sent not merely to the walled city of *Nineveh*, but rather to 'Greater *Nineveh*'.³

b. *The population of Nineveh.* The precise size of the population of *Nineveh* is a matter of some dispute, in spite of the statement in 4:11 that *Nineveh* had 'more than a hundred and twenty thousand people'. Some commentators take this number to include only children because of the expression of an inability to distinguish 'their right hand from their left'. Consequently the total population of *Nineveh* is estimated to be about 600,000.⁴ This, however, represents a population well in excess of that which could have lived within the walled city of *Nineveh*. Other scholars argue that the expression 'who cannot tell their right hand from their left' does not denote infants, but rather highlights figuratively the inability of all the inhabitants of *Nineveh* to distinguish between right and

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wrong.¹ This gives a total population of 120,000 inhabitants, which, according to L. C. Allen, 'is a reasonable figure for the historical city 3 miles wide'.² Allen, however, bases his argument on the fact that the population of nearby Calah, which was about half the size of *Nineveh*, was estimated initially by Mallowan and Wiseman to be about 65,000.³ More recently, however, Wiseman has revised substantially this estimate in favour of a much lower figure of about 18,000 persons.⁴ As a consequence of this, 120,000 inhabitants would now appear to be an overly high estimate for the total population of the walled city of *Nineveh*. It would, however, be quite appropriate for the population of 'Greater *Nineveh*'.

c. '*Nineveh* was a very important city'. A further possible indication of a late date of composition is the remark that '*Nineveh* was a very important city'. Many writers take this to imply that the time of writing was after the city's destruction in 612 bc. Given, however, that the entire report of *Jonah*'s mission to *Nineveh* is recorded in the past tense, there is no reason why the comment about *Nineveh* should be couched differently.⁵

d. *The king of Nineveh.* Another feature thought to be indicative of a late date is the expression 'king of *Nineveh*'. Two factors are held to suggest that this title was invented at a time when knowledge of the Assyrian Empire was very limited and remote. Firstly, the actual designation 'king of *Nineveh*' is unattested in the Mesopotamian documents so far uncovered and examined. Secondly, the Assyrian ruler is usually referred to as the 'king of Assyria'. Although both of these factors point towards a late date of composition, this raises further questions. Even if by the time of the Exile the

¹ C. F. Keil, *The Pentateuch*, 1 (T. & T. Clark, 1864), p. 167; cf. J. J. Davis, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Collins, 1924), p. 543; G. Ch. Alders, *Genesis*, 1 (Zondervan, 1981), p. 227. The description 'great city' is used of *Nineveh* only in Genesis and *Jonah*.

² Compare the contemporary designations 'London' and 'Greater London'. *Nineveh*, unlike the Assyrian, does not allow one to distinguish between the metropolis proper and a larger district.

³ Wiseman, *Jonah's Nineveh*, pp. 38-39, notes that the Hebrew name for metropolis proper and a larger district.

⁴ Bewer, p. 64.

¹ R. B. Y. Scott, 'The Sign of *Jonah*', *Int* 19 (1965), p. 24; Walton, p. 61. Wiseman, *Jonah's Nineveh*, pp. 39-40, notes that in Babylonian texts the phrase 'right hand and left hand' is a synonym for 'truth and justice' or 'law and order'.

² Allen, p. 222; cf. J. Simons, *The Geographical and Topographical Texts of the Old Testament* (E. J. Brill, 1959), p. 527.

³ Allen, p. 234; cf. M. E. L. Mallowan, 'The Excavations at Nimrud Assur-nasir-pal II', *Iraq* 14 (1952), pp. 20-22; D. J. Wiseman, 'A New Stela of Assur-nasir-pal II', *Iraq* 14 (1952), p. 28.

⁴ Wiseman, *Jonah's Nineveh*, pp. 41-42.

⁵ Compare Gn. 3:1, 'Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals...'

Assyrian Empire no longer existed, there still remained within the Hebrew traditions various references to it, in particular Kings 19 – 20, paralleled in Isaiah 37 – 39, and the book of Nahum. Significantly, in these passages the Assyrian ruler always receives the title 'king of Assyria', even when he is directly associated with Nineveh (2 Ki. 19:36; Is. 37:37). Thus, apart from the book of Jonah, the expression 'king of Nineveh' is never used in the Old Testament. If, assuming a late date of composition, the author of Jonah drew upon the book of Kings for his choice of prophet (*cf.* 2 Ki. 14:15), is it not strange that he did not likewise draw upon this same work for information concerning the Assyrians (*i.e.* 2 Ki. 15 – 20)? Alternatively, however, the designation 'king of Nineveh' may reflect accurately the political situation which existed at the time of Jonah's mission: at this stage the Assyrian king exercised absolute control over a very limited region centred on Nineveh – hence the designation 'king of Nineveh'.¹ It was only towards the end of the eighth century BC that the Assyrian Empire re-emerged as a major world power.

e. Late customs. The book of Jonah, it is suggested, records several customs typical of the later Persian period but both the king and his nobles (3:7),² and the giving of a decree by cloth by animals as a sign of mourning (3:8).³ Two factors, however, should caution us against relying solely on these customs for deciding the date of composition of Jonah: (1) the limited nature of the documentary evidence from Assyria in the early eighth century, and (2) the problems associated with using ancient Near Eastern customs for dating purposes.⁴ As regards the issuing of a decree by both the king and his nobles, several explanations have been offered to account for

¹ See the Additional Note, 'Eighth-century Assyria', pp. 77–81; *cf.* A. K. Grayson, 'Assyria: Ashur-dan II to Ashur-Nirari V (934–745 B.C.)', in *CAH* III/1, pp. 271–281; P. J. N. Lawrence, 'Assyrian Nobles and the Book of Jonah', *TynB* 37 (1986), pp. 121–132.

² For a list of references, see E. J. Bickerman, 'Les deux erreurs du prophète Jonas', *RHPR* 45 (1965), p. 250, n. 67.

³ *Cf.* Judith 4:10; Herodotus 9.24; Plutarch, *Alexander* 72.

⁴ *Cf.* M. Selman, 'Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age', in A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (eds.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (IVP, 1980), pp. 93–138. Although Selman discusses the use of customs for dating the patriarchal period his observations are applicable to later periods.

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this within an Assyrian context. According to Wiseman,¹ during a time of extreme crisis (*e.g.* a solar eclipse) it was not unusual for a king to descend from his throne and be replaced by a substitute king until the time of danger had passed. The unknown for a king in Jonah 3:6 possibly reflect such a *šar puhi* by a substitute king in Jonah 3:6 possibly reflect such a *šar puhi* actions of the king in Jonah 3:6 possibly reflect such a *šar puhi* ritual, and this might account for the decree. Alternatively, being associated in the issuing of the decree. Alternatively, P. J. N. Lawrence believes that the joint issuing of the decree is a consequence of the political situation which existed in Assyria during the early part of the eighth century.² At this time Assyria was controlled by weak kings surrounded by powerful provincial governors. Consequently the head of the Assyrian dynasty found it necessary to issue a decree in conjunction with his nobles.

From our investigation of the supposed historical inaccuracies in Jonah it is evident that there is no compelling reason to believe that the author of Jonah wrote at a time when eighth-century Assyria belonged to the dim and distant past. On the contrary, there are various indications that the story of Jonah accurately reflects the situation which existed in Assyria during the middle of the eighth century BC. Given, however, our very limited knowledge of this particular period of Assyrian history, any conclusions reached regarding the historical background of the book of Jonah must remain tentative. Nevertheless, in the light of the evidence just considered there is no reason why the date of composition of the book of Jonah should be placed in the post-exilic era.

C. Further considerations

As well as the linguistic features of the text and the supposed presence of legendary descriptions, several other factors have been taken into account by scholars seeking to determine the date of composition: (1) literary dependency; (2) audience. However, at the outset it must be stressed that these criteria tend to be less objective than those just considered. At best they are really only suitable for confirming a date which has already been reached on the basis of other considerations.

¹ Wiseman, 'Jonah's Nineveh', pp. 47, 51.

² Lawrence, 'Assyrian Nobles', pp. 121–132.

a. *Literary dependency.* It has long been recognized that various elements in the book of Jonah bear a close resemblance to material found in other Old Testament books.¹ To account for this it is argued that the author of Jonah was familiar with these other works, and since some of this source material dated to the time of the Babylonian exile the book of Jonah must have been composed subsequently.² This argument is a post-exilic date resists, however, on a very insecure foundation: there is no way of determining with certainty the foundation of borrowing. Other considerations aside, it could equally well be argued that these works were dependent on Jonah.

b. *Audience.* On the assumption that Jonah must have been penned to meet a particular need, scholars have sought to identify the situation which gave rise to the writing of the book.³ Although this approach is methodologically valid, the task of identifying the book's audience is fraught with complications. Various attempts to do so have subsequently been shown to be quite inadequate. Thus, for example, it used to be popular to suggest that the book was directed at Jews who adopted a bigoted attitude towards Gentiles in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, as R. E. Clements has demonstrated, the actual evidence does not support the opinion that the book was composed against such a background.⁴ Experience shows that any attempt to identify the audience of the book is likely to be too subjective to be of lasting value in determining its date of composition.

Although the majority of recent writers on Jonah favour an exilic or post-exilic date for the composition of the book, the linguistic evidence examined above does not exclude an earlier date, possibly as early as the eighth century, especially if the book was composed in the northern kingdom of Israel. Nor

is the possibility of such an early date ruled out by other considerations. As our investigation of the other relevant criteria has revealed, there is nothing which is totally incompatible with a pre-exilic date of composition.

II. UNITY OF COMPOSITION

Closely related to the issue of authorship and date is the question of unity of composition. Was the book of Jonah produced by a single individual, or did various writers contribute to its present form?

During the nineteenth century Jonah, in common with other Old Testament books, was subjected to rigorous and exacting scrutiny by scholars interested in uncovering its redactional history. As a result the text was severely dissected, with some scholars uncovering as many as four different writers contributing to the final form of the book.¹ From the vantage point of the present day the excesses of this approach are all too apparent. However, although twentieth-century scholars have rejected, as far as Jonah is concerned, the source-critical conclusions of their nineteenth-century counterparts, one aspect of the book has continued to figure prominently in discussions regarding its unity: this concerns the authenticity of the poetic section in Jonah 2:2-9.

As early as 1786 Ch. G. Hensler suggested that there were incongruities between the psalm of chapter 2 and the rest of the book.² A few years later J. G. A. Müller speculated that whereas the psalm was composed in the eighth century BC by Jonah himself, the rest of the book was the product of an exilic author.³ This position, however, was overturned by W. M. L. DeWette, who argued for the priority of the prose narrative,

¹ Similarities have been noted with the following passages: Gn. 6:11, 13, 19:25, 29; 1 Ki. 19:4-5; Pss. 18:6; 69:1; 88:6-7; 118:5; 120:1; Je. 18:11; 26:3, 15; Ezk. 24:16; 27:8-9, 25-29; Joel 1:13; 2:13-14.

² Cf. A. Feuillet, 'Les sources du livre de Jonas', *RB* 54 (1947), pp. 161-186. Feuillet also argues that this dependence upon other works indicates that the book of Jonah is a fictitious narrative. This, however, is rejected by B. Trépanier, 'The Story of Jonas', *CBQ* 13 (1951), pp. 8-16.

³ Cf. D. F. Payne, 'Jonah from the Perspective of its Audience', *JSOT* 13 (1979), pp. 3-12.

⁴ R. E. Clements, 'The Purpose of the Book of Jonah', *VTS* 28 (1975), pp. 18-19.

¹ For an outline and critique of nineteenth-century approaches, see Bewer, pp. 13-21. On the distribution and use of the divine names, Yahweh and Elohim, see F. D. Kiderer, 'The Distribution of Divine Names in Jonah', *TynB* 21 (1970), pp. 77-87; Magonet, pp. 34-38.

² Ch. G. Hensler, *Animadversiones in quatuor duodecim prophetarum minorum loca* (1786); see G. M. Landes, 'The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah', *Int* 21 (1967), p. 3.

³ J. G. A. Müller, 'Jonah, eine moralische Erzählung', in Paulus' *Memorabilien*, 6 (1794), pp. 142-143.

with the psalm being a later insertion.¹ If incongruities exist between the psalm and the surrounding narrative, there can be only one explanation for this: the author of the psalm account had no detailed knowledge of the psalm's contents. The psalm must therefore have been incorporated into the text of Jonah at a later stage. This position was to form the critical consensus for the next one hundred and fifty years.

The last twenty years, however, have witnessed a significant transformation in attitudes towards the compositional unity of Jonah. A substantial number of recent writers now dismiss as quite inadequate the evidence *against* viewing 2:2-9 as an integral part of the book.² The reasons for doing so are outlined below. Before considering these, however, so are the suggestion to summarize briefly those arguments which favour polation into the prose narrative in chapter 2 was a later inter-

1. On the basis of form and content 2:2-9 is usually interpreted as a psalm of individual thanksgiving. It is argued, however, that a psalm of thanksgiving is quite inappropriate in the present context. Given his incarceration within the belly of the great fish, Jonah, it is suggested, is hardly likely to have expressed gratitude to God.

2. Jonah's character as revealed in the psalm is at odds with the author's portrayal of him elsewhere in the book. For example, the picture of Jonah gratefully praising God is hardly in keeping with the prose section which portrays him as rebellious, sullen and unappreciative. Similarly, whereas in 1:12 he apparently greets the prospect of dying with little apprehension, his words in 2:2 reveal tremendous anxiety in the face of imminent death.

3. Certain comments in the psalm are at variance with statements found in the prose narrative. For example, in 1:15 it is stated that the sailors were responsible for hurling Jonah into the sea. Yet Jonah claims in 2:3 that Yahweh cast him into the deep. In chapter 1 Jonah flees from God of his own

accord, while it is emphasized in 2:4 that he was actually banished from the divine presence. The derogatory remarks about pagans in 2:8 seem strange in view of the positive portrayal of the sailors and the Ninevites in chapters 1 and 3 respectively. Finally, whereas the psalm expresses gratitude for deliverance from drowning, the narrative in chapter 1 respectively. Finally, whereas the psalm expresses gratitude for deliverance from drowning, the narrative in chapter 1 conveys the impression that Jonah, after being thrown overboard, was immediately swallowed by the fish.

4. There are linguistic discrepancies between 2:2-9 and the rest of the book which cannot be accounted for purely on the basis of a distinction between prose and poetry. A different term is used for 'throw' in 2:3 from that found in 1:12, 15. Whereas in chapter 1 the singular 'sea' is consistently employed (vv. 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15), in 2:3 the plural word 'seas' occurs. The expression 'from the face of' in 1:3, 10 is replaced in 2:4 by 'from before the eyes of'. Furthermore, certain words which are common in the prose are totally absent from the psalm. For example, although 'great' comes fourteen times in the prose narrative, it never occurs in the psalm.¹ The term *rā'āh*, 'evil', does not figure in the psalm, yet appears seven times in the rest of the book.²

5. By excising 2:2-9 the original structure of the book is restored. According to N. Lohfink, verses 1:17, 2:1 and 2:10, taken together, form a well-defined chiasmus:³

- A God appointed a fish to swallow Jonah (1:17a)
- B Jonah was within the fish (1:17b)
- B¹ Jonah prayed from within the fish (2:1)
- A¹ God commanded the fish to vomit up Jonah (2:10).

With the inclusion of 2:2-9 this pattern is destroyed. From a different perspective P. L. Tribe concludes that the entire book of Jonah consists of two parallel sections: chapters 1 and 2 are paralleled by chapters 3 and 4. However, to achieve the best correspondence between the two sections it is necessary to delete 2:2-9.⁴

¹ W. M. L. DeWette, *Lehrbuch der historisch-kritischen Einleitung in kanonischen und apocryphischen Bücher des A. T.* (Reiner, 1817), p. 298.

² For a comprehensive list of recent writers who question the later addition of the psalm, see D. L. Christensen, 'The Song of Jonah: A Metrical Analysis', *JBL* 104 (1985), p. 217, n. 3.

³ Cf. Tribe, pp. 75-80; P. Weimar, 'Jon 2,1-11, Jonapsalm und Jonaeerzählung', *BZ* 28 (1984), pp. 46-50.

¹ 1:2, 4 (twice), 10, 13, 15; 2:1; 3:2, 3, 5, 7; 4:1, 7, 11; cf. Wolff (1975), p. 61, n. 82; Fretheim, pp. 43-44.

² 1:2, 7, 8; 3:10; 4:1, 2, 6. The same term comes as an adjective in 3:8, 10, 37.

³ N. Lohfink, 'Jona ging zur Stadt hinaus (Jon 4,5)', *BZ* 5 (1962), p. 196, n. 37.

⁴ Tribe, pp. 76, 184-202. According to Tribe, the prayer in 4:2 parallels the sailors' prayer in 1:14, and not Jonah's prayer in 2:2-9.

Although there appear to be substantial grounds for believing that 2:2-9 is not an authentic part of the book of Jonah, these arguments are not wholly convincing.

1. Recent studies confirm that the psalm in chapter 2 expresses gratitude not for deliverance from the book of fish, as many older commentators supposed, but rather for deliverance from drowning.¹ The fish, like the gourd in 4:6, is divinely appointed to rescue, not punish.² The psalm is therefore quite appropriate in its present context. From within the great fish Jonah reflects on his near death by drowning and praises God for answering his cry for help.

2. The character of Jonah as presented in the psalm need not be viewed as incompatible with what we know of him elsewhere in the book. The picture of Jonah praising God for saving him from drowning finds a parallel in his attitude immediately following the divine provision of the gourd: 'Jonah was exceedingly glad' (4:6, RSV). On the supposed lack of harmony between chapters 1 and 2 regarding Jonah's attitude to death, Landes comments:

[Jonah] is willing to risk the possibility of death, but he does not yearn to die or welcome annihilation with open arms. The difference in language at 1:12 and 4:3, 8 underlines this. In Chapter 4 Jonah's wish for death is heavily stressed by reiteration, while in Chapter 1 neither the noun 'death' nor any synonym for 'to die' is introduced. . . . Thus when Jonah finds himself in the watery Deep, he joins that company of Israelites who have experienced the threat and terror of an untimely death and cried to Yahweh for deliverance.³

Thus chapters 1 and 2 are not inconsistent regarding Jonah's disposition towards death. Furthermore, without the psalm of thanksgiving there is no reason to suppose that Jonah's initial attitude to God's call has changed following his expulsion from the ship. Yet the book's plot requires an

¹ Cf. Allen, p. 184; J. T. Walsh, 'Jonah 2,3-10: A Rhetorical Critical Study', *Bib* 63 (1982), pp. 219-229; Christensen, 'The Song of Jonah', pp. 226-227.

² See Landes, 'The Kerygma', pp. 12-13. The allegorical interpretation that the swallowing of Jonah by the fish represents Judah being swallowed up into captivity by the Babylonians must be rejected. The fish is an instrument of salvation, not punishment.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

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explanation as to why Jonah should be willing to go to Nineveh in chapter 3. The statement of Jonah's gratitude to God for deliverance from death is an essential link between chapters 1 and 3.

3. Supposed contradictions between the psalm and the rest of the book present no real problem. Throughout the psalm Jonah readily acknowledges the absolute sovereignty of God. Thus, although the sailors cast him overboard, in Jonah's eyes it was God who engineered the entire situation; the sailors are merely the means by which God punishes him. No contradiction, therefore, exists between 1:15 and 2:3. Similarly, the reference to banishment in 2:4 is not at odds with the earlier statement about Jonah's desire to abscond from God's presence (1:3). Although Jonah seeks to evade his commission by fleeing to Tarshish, he becomes conscious of being divinely banished only after his ejection from the ship. Jonah's banishment is a consequence of his attempt to evade his commission. The comment about idolators in 2:8 is hardly incompatible with the rest of the book. The episodes involving the sailors and the Ninevites both reveal that it is only those who turn to Yahweh who can expect to find grace. Finally, although chapter 1 may give the impression that Jonah was instantly swallowed by the fish and therefore did not come close to drowning, the text gives no indication as to how long Jonah remained in the water. In any case, since Jonah could not have survived long underwater, he must have been rescued quickly.

4. Linguistic discrepancies between the prose and poetry need not necessarily mean that the psalm is a secondary addition. Alternative explanations are possible. The fact that the psalm draws upon traditional cultic language could account for such differences.¹ Moreover, the psalm and the narrative framework may have been composed by separate individuals. This, however, need not require, as is generally supposed, that the psalm is later.

Furthermore, it ought not to be overlooked that there is some correspondence in themes and terminology between the prose and poetry. For example, the theme of *going down*, as

¹ Considerable attention has been given to the affinities between this and other psalms; cf. A. R. Johnson, 'Jonah 2,3-10: A Study in Cultic Phantasy', in H. H. Rowley (ed.), *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy presented to T. H. Robinson* (T. & T. Clark, 1950), pp. 82-102; Magouet, pp. 44-54.

various writers observe, is significant in chapters 1 and 2:1. Jonah goes down to Joppa (1:3), to the ship (1:3), below deck (1:5), and, eventually, to the roots of the mountains (2:6). This downward movement is only reversed in 2:6, where Jonah states, 'You brought my life up from the pit.' Another link between the initial two chapters is the fact that the sailors (1:16) and Jonah (2:9) respond to God's mercy by offering sacrifices and making vows.²

5. The study of literary structures in the book of Jonah is a relatively recent innovation, and the observations of Lohfink and Tribble, noted above, were significant in the initial development of such an approach. Since then, however, further development has tended to favour the retention of 2:2-9 as an integral part of the book of Jonah.

It has long been recognized that the initial call of Jonah (1:1-3) is closely paralleled by his second summons in 3:1-3a. This observation has prompted various writers to suggest that the second half of the book parallels the first. J. Magonet, for example, outlines the overall structure of the book as follows:³

- A 1:1-16 The first call – flight. Sailors.
- B 2:1 Transition.
- C 2:2-11 Prayer – 'discussion' with God.
- A¹ 3:1-10 The second call – obedience. Nineveh.
- B¹ 4:1 Transition.
- C¹ 4:2-11 Prayer – 'discussion' with God.

Apart from having similar introductions, sections A and A¹ correspond by portraying favourably the actions of the pagan sailors and the Ninevites. Sections C and C¹, however, focus entirely on Jonah, highlighting his reactions to the events of the preceding episodes. The gratitude which he expresses for his own deliverance in chapter 2 contrasts sharply with the abhorrence which he feels in chapter 4 as a result of God's willingness to forgive Nineveh. Unlike Tribble, however, Magonet argues for the retention of the psalm in chapter 2

¹ Cf. J. S. Ackerman, 'Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah', in B. Halpern and J. D. Levenson (eds.), *Traditions in Transformation. Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (Eisenbrauns, 1981), pp. 223-224, 229-235; Christensen, 'The Song of Jonah', p. 226.

² Allen, p. 184, n. 47, notes also the following similarities in terminology between the prose and poetry: *q*, 'call', 1:6, 14; 2:2; *neḇeš*, 'life', 1:14; 2:5, 7; 'Yahweh his/my God', 2:1, 6.

³ Magonet, p. 55; cf. Rudolph, p. 326; Fretheim, p. 55.

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on the basis that it finds a counterpart in 4:1-3. Not only are both prayers introduced by similar statements, 'and he [Jonah] prayed to Yahweh . . . and said', but as Allen comments, 'The themes that drew forth Jonah's praise in the psalm are ironically the very ones that cause him grief in his second prayer.'¹ By removing chapter 2 the balanced structure of the book is destroyed.

In the preceding paragraphs we have sought to evaluate the arguments for and against excising the psalm in chapter 2 as a later interpolation. The weight of evidence clearly favours the retention of 2:2-9 as part of the author's original draft. It is an essential element in the plot of the book, providing a very necessary bridge between the events of chapters 1 and 3. We concur, therefore, with the majority of recent writers that the book of Jonah, as it now stands, is a literary unity.

III. GENRE

Considerable time and effort have been expended by modern writers on the question of the genre² of the book of Jonah. What type of work did the author intend to produce? Under what literary category should the book be classified?

The importance of these questions should not be underestimated. It has long been noted that the book of Jonah is markedly different from the other works which comprise the Minor Prophets. Whereas they focus primarily on the sayings of the prophets, the book of Jonah concentrates rather on the events surrounding the prophet's mission and contains but the briefest record of his pronouncements.

More significantly, however, the identification of the book's genre is of importance for our interpretation of the text. If we are to grasp correctly what the author sought to communicate, we must identify the literary category to which his work belongs. It is essential, therefore, to determine what kind of literature the author intended to write. Did he wish the book to be regarded as in some sense a work of fiction, or as history?

¹ Allen, p. 199; cf. Ackerman, 'Satire and Symbolism', pp. 224-225.

² For a fuller treatment of this issue, see my essay 'Jonah and Genre', *TynB* 36 (1985), pp. 35-59.

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A. Fiction

Recent efforts to classify the book of Jonah as fiction have produced a wide range of suggestions: allegory;¹ midrash;² parable;³ prophetic parable;⁴ legend;⁵ prophetic legend;⁶ story;¹⁰ satire;⁸ didactic fiction;⁹ satirical, didactic, short sidereal lack of agreement among scholars suggests that there is a genre of Jonah. This, however, is not really so. Differences of opinion over the choice of some of these terms are of a relatively minor nature. The large number of suggestions reflects rather the difficulty of finding a single label which commands widespread support. Thus, for example, there is little to distinguish in practice between the designations parable and didactic fiction, although, as we have argued elsewhere, the term parable is not particularly apt, especially if one thinks in terms of the New Testament use of the word.¹¹

The majority of scholars now reject as unlikely the possibility

¹ G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, Expositor's Bible (Hodder and Stoughton, 21898); Martin, Johnson, 'Cultic Phantasy', pp. 82-102; Knight, *ZAW* 12 (1892), pp. 37-51 (a midrash on 2 Ki. 14:25); L. H. Brockington, 'Jonah', in M. Black, H. H. Rowley (eds.), *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (Nelson, 1962), pp. 627-629 (a midrash on Je. 18:8); Trible (a midrash on Ex. 34:6).

² Brewer, J. Smart, 'The Book of Jonah', *The Interpreter's Bible*, 6 (Abingdon, 1956), pp. 871-894; Watts, Allen, P. C. Craigie, *The Twelve Prophets*, 1, The Daily Study Bible (Saint Andrew Press, 1984).

³ A. Rolfe, 'Classes in the Prophetic Stories: Didactic Legend and Parable', *VTS* 26 (1974), pp. 143-164.

⁴ O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament. An Introduction* (Basil Blackwell, 1965), pp. 403-406; A. Jepsen, 'Anmerkungen zum Buch Jona', *Wort-Gebot-Glaube. Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Walter Eichrodt zum 80. Geburtstag, *Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 59 (1970), pp. 297-305.

⁵ Haller, Keller.

⁶ Wolff (1975); O. Kaiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. J. Sturdy (Basil Blackwell, 1975), pp. 194-198; G. M. Landes, 'Jonah, Book of', *IDBS*, pp. 488-491.

⁷ M. Burrows, 'The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah', in H. T. Frank, W. L. Reed (eds.), *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament* (Abingdon, 1970), pp. 80-107; Allen.

⁸ Weiser, Wolff, 'Jonabuch', in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, (Tübingen, 1959), pp. 853-856; Rudolph.

⁹ Fretheim, Wolff (1977).

¹⁰ Alexander, 'Jonah and Genre', pp. 38-40.

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ity that the book of Jonah is either allegory or midrash.¹ Allegorical interpretations of the text have not proved particularly convincing. Although a few recent writers still maintain that the name Jonah, meaning 'dove', is symbolic, the majority of modern commentators now dismiss this idea completely.² The suggestion that Jonah's imprisonment in the fish represents the Babylonian captivity is also less than convincing, especially when it is recognized that the fish is portrayed as an instrument of deliverance, not punishment. As regards Jonah being a midrash (i.e. an exposition of a biblical text), no agreement has been reached as to what passage the book of Jonah expounds. Moreover, Jewish midrash is a post-exilic phenomenon, whereas, as we have argued above, the book of Jonah belongs to the pre-exilic period.

As is evident from many of the proposed classifications of Jonah, the question of the historical nature of the book is of considerable importance. Many of the terms used are deliberately chosen because they designate non-historical writings (e.g. parable, legend, novelle). This tendency to view the book as fiction rather than fact is a relatively modern development and is proposed mainly on the basis of the following arguments.

a. *Historical improbability.* A major difficulty confronting many modern readers is the number of extraordinary events which are recorded. Jonah's rescue by the great fish, the repentance of the entire city of Nineveh, the remarkable growth of the plant and its equally swift destruction are hardly everyday events. Since, so it is argued, it is highly improbable that these ever occurred, they must be the creation of the author's mind; the book of Jonah cannot possibly be based on actual happenings.

However, while many modern readers may view these events with considerable scepticism, it is surely more important to ask how the author of Jonah viewed them.

¹ Cf. Aalders, *Problem*, pp. 15-16; Burrows, 'Literary Category', pp. 88-90; Eybers, 'The Purpose of the Book of Jonah', pp. 212-213; however, Allen, p. 181, maintains that the book contains 'certain allegorical features'.

² The most recent writer to suggest that the name Jonah is significant is A. J. Hausen, 'Jonah: In Pursuit of the Dove', *JBL* 104 (1985), pp. 21-37. His proposal that the dove was associated in the Old Testament with 'flight' and 'passivity' is suggestive, but not completely convincing.

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Although he may have thought them extremely unusual, he need not necessarily have dismissed them as completely improbable. After all, the author of the biblical book of Kings incorporates into his historically based account events which are no less incredible than those found in Jonah (e.g. Elijah's ascent into heaven, 2 Ki. 2:1-18), and clearly, he was quite prepared to accept these as having actually occurred. In view of this, it is surely mistaken to expect an ancient writer to abide by modern standards of historical probability and improbability. Furthermore, even if it could be clearly demonstrated, as some modern writers suggest, that some of these events did not take place, this does not automatically indicate that the author of Jonah did not view them as historically indicating what is all important is the author's perception of what he was writing. In the present instance, weighing historical probability and improbability does not answer this issue. To determine the author's intention we must look elsewhere.

b. Hyperbole. A second feature of the book of Jonah which is thought to indicate its non-historical character is hyperbole. Everything, from the fish to the population of Nineveh, is presented in an exaggerated manner.¹ This, it is suggested, is no sober account of reality, but rather a flight of fancy on the part of the author, who never intended his work to be treated as a serious piece of historical narrative; it was composed primarily to entertain and amuse the reader. Consequently various writers have stressed the ironical or satirical tone of the entire book.²

That the author of Jonah actually portrays everything as

¹ Attention is drawn to the repeated use of the adjective *gāḏl*, which occurs fourteen times in the book.

² Burrows, 'Literary Category', pp. 95-96, develops the idea that everything is exaggerated and suggests that the book was composed as a satire. Similarly, Fretheim, pp. 51-53, sees these exaggerations as ironical; cf. E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (SPCK, 1965), pp. 39-55; Ackerman, 'Satire and Symbolism', pp. 213-246; M. West, 'Irony in the Book of Jonah: Audience Identification with the Hero', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 11 (1984), pp. 232-242; S. D. Goitein, 'Some Observations on Jonah', *JPOS* 17 (1937), p. 74, rejects the view that the book of Jonah is a satire: 'The whole tenor of the story is much too earnest for a satire; Jonah is not painted with the brush of mockery or disdain, but drawn with the pencil of deep and sympathetic insight into human weakness' (quoted by Magouret, p. 86); cf. C. A. Keller, 'Le portrait d'un prophète', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 21 (1965), p. 329; A. D. Cohen, 'The Tragedy of Jonah', *Judaism* 21 (1972), pp. 170-172.

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larger than life is highly questionable. A careful analysis of the text suggests that events are not exaggerated but rather reflect accurately the situation described. For example, it is only to be expected that a fish capable of swallowing a man should be designated 'big' (1:17). Moreover, the author, if anything, actually plays down the miraculous nature of the various extraordinary events recorded in the narrative. Thus his description of Jonah being swallowed by the great fish is told in a very matter-of-fact manner, with no attempt being made to embellish the account with extravagant details. This seems remarkable, especially when we are asked to believe that the author is fond of hyperbole. Whereas many modern expositions of Jonah tend to dramatize the events in a most unrealistic manner, the same is not true of the Hebrew original.

c. Symmetrical structure. Modern studies of Jonah have revealed that the entire book shows signs of careful composition. The presence of symmetrical structures underlying the text, however, has led some scholars to suggest that this is a further indication that the book is fictional. As T. E. Fretheim comments, 'The carefully worked out structures in the book... suggest a non-historical intention on the author's part. Such a concern for structure and symmetry is not as characteristic of straightforward historical writing and is more suggestive of an imaginative product'.¹

However, although the author of Jonah makes use of literary structures, this need not automatically imply that his work is fictional. A distinction needs to be drawn between form of presentation and content. The fact that the author of Jonah employs particular literary devices tells us more about his skill as an author than about the historicity or non-historicity of his account. Furthermore, although the book of Jonah exhibits certain literary structures and patterns, these are in no way as restrictive and limiting as Fretheim implies. There is no reason why a skilful author could not use these and still present an accurate account of what took place.

d. Didactic nature. A further reason why many scholars assume the book of Jonah to be non-historical is its didactic

¹ Fretheim, p. 66.

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nature. It is argued that the book was not written with intention of recording actual events, but rather with the aim to convey particular ideas. Some writers would even go so far as to say that the didactic nature of the book is perhaps the most compelling reason for viewing it as fictional.¹ Because this conclusion, however, does not follow. Writers who adopt this argument unfortunately create a quite unnecessary distinction between 'historical' and 'didactic' works. There is no reason why the book of Jonah may not be both didactic and historical. The fact that the author of Jonah communicates to his readers a particular message does not exclude the possibility that his account is based on historical happenings. Indeed, it is the very reality of these events which adds significance to the teaching of the book.

In spite of their popular appeal, these arguments for the fictional nature of the book of Jonah are not as decisive as they may at first appear.

B. History

On the other hand several factors favour the view that the author of Jonah consciously wrote about these events believing them to have actually occurred.

a. *Traditional understanding.* Although the majority of modern scholars prefer to view Jonah as fictional, this is a relatively recent development. Only in the past one hundred years has there been a marked departure from what was once the almost unanimous opinion that the events described actually occurred.² Although traditional positions are not necessarily correct, it is surely significant that such unanimity existed regarding the nature of the book of Jonah.

The fact that generations of scholars and writers were convinced that the author of Jonah did not intend to write fiction argues against the modern view that the form or

¹ Cf. J. Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Magnes, 1978), p. 124.

² The historicity of Jonah is accepted by the following writers: G. Ch. Alders, *The Problems of the Book of Jonah* (Tynedale Press, 1948); Trépanier, *The Story of Jonas*, pp. 8-16; E. F. Sutcliffe, 'Jonas', in B. Orchard, E. F. Sutcliffe, R. C. Fuller, R. Russell (eds.), *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (Thomas Nelson and Son, 1953), pp. 669-671; Robinson, 'Jonah', pp. 746-751; Maier, Walton.

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style of the narrative conveys this very impression. Were these earlier generations completely blind to features which we are asked to believe are immediately apparent? Did these earlier writers not live and study in an environment much closer to that of the author of Jonah than we do? And if so, would they not have been more attuned to the generic signals of an ancient narrative? With these factors in mind, we must surely expect good reasons for ignoring or rejecting the traditional appraisal of Jonah.¹

Thus, for example, the first-century AD Jewish historian Flavius Josephus incorporates the story of Jonah into his history of the Jewish people (*Antiquities* 9.206-214). He justifies his inclusion of this material by making the following remark: 'But, since I have promised to give an exact account of our history, I have thought it necessary to recount what I have found written in the Hebrew books concerning this prophet.'²

This traditional understanding of the book ought not to be dismissed lightly. It is perhaps a better guide to the book's genre than the opinions of modern scholars who are perhaps insufficiently critical of their own presuppositions regarding supernatural occurrences. We must never forget that the author of Jonah lived in a culture whose ethos was very different from that of modern Western society.

b. *Historical introduction.* Another feature which suggests that the book of Jonah was intended by its author to be understood as historical is the way in which it begins. Two points are worth emphasizing here.

1. The main character of the book is identified as Jonab ben (son of) Amittai. 2 Kings 14:25 mentions a prophet of the same name, who during the reign of Jeroboam II (782/81-753 BC) predicted the expansion of Israel's territory. This naturally raises the question, why, if they never actually occurred, did the author apparently associate the events recorded in the book of Jonah with a known prophet? Is it not strange that having invented the entire plot the author did not likewise invent his central character?

¹ Alexander, 'Jonah and Genre', p. 58

² From the translation by R. Marcus, *Josephus*, VI (Heinemann, 1937), pp. 109-111.

2. The style of introduction is similar to that found in other historical works. The opening words are very reminiscent of 1 Kings 17:8-9, 'The word of the Lord came to him [Elijah], "Arise, go to Zarephath . . ."; To anyone familiar with Hebrew narrative, such an introduction must surely have suggested that what followed was intended by the author to be treated as fact. Thus the very first impression with the introductory words of the book is that the account created by to be taken as fact, not fiction.

c. *Other considerations.* Finally, two other considerations which have a bearing on the historicity of the book of Jonah must be mentioned briefly.

1. Many scholars are inclined to view the book as fictional because of the supposed legendary features of the text. The author, it is argued, is far removed from the period and situation about which he writes and therefore merely imagines how things may once have been. However, it is highly questionable whether the text contains legendary details. We have already examined them in considering the date of composition and concluded that they are by no means as certain as some scholars suppose. Indeed a mid-eighth century BC setting the light of events taking place then in Assyria.¹ While this does not prove that the book is an accurate record of actual happenings, it does lend weight to a historical interpretation of the text.

2. The closest literary parallel to the book of Jonah is probably the account found in 1 Kings 17-19 concerning the prophet Elijah. Various links with this material are noted in the commentary, especially in chapter 4.² Although many scholars raise questions about the actual nature of the events described in 1 Kings 17-19, few would go so far as to say that they have no historical basis. There would seem to be good grounds for adopting a similar approach towards the book of Jonah.

¹ See the Additional Note, 'Eighth-century Assyria', pp. 77-81.

² Porren, 'Baashamem and the Date of Jonah', pp. 238-239, draws attention to the following parallels which exist between the book of Jonah and the prophetic tales which relate to the Omri dynasty (1 Ki. 18-2 Ki. 8): (1) the occurrence of extraordinary happenings; (2) events which range beyond the borders of Israel.

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Conclusion

Hebrew authors no doubt had their own literary conventions and classifications. For this reason modern labels may not be altogether appropriate. Nevertheless, in the light of the above discussion the following conclusions may be drawn regarding the genre of the book of Jonah. On the one hand, in agreement with the consensus of modern scholarship, we would wish to emphasize the didactic nature of the text. Whatever else our author intended, he clearly sought to impart a theological lesson to his readers. On the other hand, however, against the current of modern thought on Jonah, we would suggest that the author's message derives from actual historical events and that these form the basis of his account. Consequently the most appropriate designation for the book's genre would appear to be didactic history.

Note on eighth-century Assyria

Although no specific date is given within the book itself, it is generally accepted that the account of Jonah's mission to Nineveh ought to be placed within the first three-quarters of the eighth century BC; this seems to be clearly indicated by the fact that 2 Kings 14:15 connects Jonah ben Amittai with the reign of the Israelite king Jeroboam II (782/81-753 BC). With this dating in mind, let us consider briefly the history of eighth-century BC Assyria.

To appreciate the situation which developed within Assyria in the first half of the eighth century it is necessary to begin some time earlier. Under the leadership of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) and Shalmaneser III (859/58-824/23), Assyria experienced remarkable growth and prosperity; according to A. K. Grayson, this was one of the golden ages of Mesopotamian history.¹ However, things were not to remain like this for long, and even before his death Shalmaneser began to witness the break-up of his mighty kingdom. In 826 a major rebellion broke out within Assyria itself, led by the eldest of Shalmaneser's sons, Ashur-da'in-apla. One of the factors prompting this crisis was Shalmaneser's inability to restrict the authority of provincial governors who 'assumed powers

¹ Grayson, 'Assyria', p. 259.

KINGS OF ISRAEL AND ASSYRIA

Omri	Israel	885/84-874/73
Ahab	Assyria	874/73-853
Ahaziah	Ashurnasirpal II	853-852
Joram	Shalmaneser III	852-841
Jehu		841-814/13
Jehoahaz	Shamshi-Adad V	814/13-798
Jehoash	Adad-nirari III	798-782/81
Jeroboam II		782/81-753
(co-regent from 793/92)		
Zechariah	Shalmaneser IV	753-752
Shallum	Ashur-dan III	752
Menahem	Ashur-nirari V	752-742/41
Pekahiah		
Pekah	Tiglath-pileser III	742/41-740/39
Hoshea		740/39-732/31
		732/31-723/22
	Shalmaneser V	723/21-722
	Sargon II	722/21-705/4

out of proportion to the real nature of their duties'.¹ The revolt was not quelled until 820, when another of the king's sons, Shamshi-Adad V (823-811/10), following the death of his father, finally defeated the rebels. However, the preceding seven years of internal strife and disruption had taken their toll and they marked the beginning of a period of significant decline for Assyria. Although Shamshi-Adad V took steps to

¹ Grayson, 'Assyria', p. 273.

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re-establish Assyria's position as the leading world power, and not without some success, his reign was far too brief to permit the restoration of the nation to its former glory. Over the next seventy years Assyria was to experience a period of marked decline and eclipse. Not until the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (745/44-727/26) would the nation's fortune take a decisive turn once more for the better.

After his father's death, Adad-nirari III (810-783/82) succeeded to the throne. Unfortunately, our knowledge of his twenty-seven year reign is very limited; only one major royal inscription has so far been discovered. Other texts from this time, concerning provincial rulers, convey the impression that the king's power was severely curtailed. As Grayson remarks, 'A prominent phenomenon in this dark age... is the emergence of powerful provincial governors who act as virtual monarchs in their own districts, although most profess allegiance to the Assyrian crown.'¹ The earlier revolt had done little to restrict the authority of the provincial governors.

One of the most important of these officials, Shamshi-ilu, seems to have enjoyed a particularly long and successful career (possibly from at least 792 to 752). During the reign of Shalmaneser IV (783/82-773/72), Shamshi-ilu records on two stone lions at the Syrian city of Til Barsip (Tell Ahmar) his victory over Argishtish, king of Urartu, without making any mention of the Assyrian king; according to G. Roux this was 'unprecedented in Assyrian records'.² Nor is Shamshi-ilu an exception. It is possible to identify a number of other important officials who, although paying nominal allegiance to the Assyrian king, appear to have exercised considerable independence during the first half of the eighth century.³

In contrast to provincial rulers like Shamshi-ilu, the Assyrian kings of this period seem particularly impotent. This is especially the case with Shalmaneser IV (783/82-773/72), Ashur-dan III (772/71-755/54) and Ashur-nirari V (754/

¹ Grayson, 'Assyria', p. 273.

² Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, p. 280; cf. F. Thureau-Dangin, 'L'inscription des lions de Til-Barsip', *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie orientale* 27 (1930), pp. 15-19; Grayson, 'Assyria', pp. 278-279; Lawrence, 'Assyrian Nobles', pp. 127-129.

³ Lawrence, 'Assyrian Nobles', pp. 123-126, discusses briefly the careers of two other provincial governors, Bel-tarsi-iluma and Nergal-ersh; Grayson, 'Assyria', pp. 273-274, mentions Nergal-ersh, and elsewhere (p. 279) refers to several other important officials, Bel-kharran-beli-usur and Shamash-resha-usur.

53-746/745). Unfortunately what we know of the reigns of these three kings, all sons of Adad-nirari III, is meagre. Possibly this reflects the troubled times in which they lived.

Several features are worth noting about this period of Assyrian history. Firstly, there was a marked decrease in the number of campaigns against foreign nations. Possibly the Assyrian Eponym Chronicle, Ashur-dan III remained in the land' (*i.e.* did not embark on an external military campaign) for four years of his reign (768, 764, 757, 756), Ashur-nirari V did likewise for five years (753, 752, 751, 750, 747). Furthermore, there were domestic rebellions in Ashur (763-762), Arrapkha (761-760) and Calah (746). These factors clearly indicate the increasing impotence of the Assyrian monarchs towards the middle of the eighth century BC. Secondly, during the reign of Ashur-dan III there occurred two events which would have been viewed as particularly ominous: (1) a famine and (2) a solar eclipse. Famine came to the land in the year 765 and either recurred in 759, or possibly continued for the entire seven year period. Famine same time there occurred a total solar eclipse, now reckoned to have taken place on 15 June 763. Such happenings would certainly have been viewed with considerable apprehension and fear. As Wiseman suggests, had Jonah appeared in Nineveh about this time, his message might well have evoked the kind of response recorded in chapter three.¹

In the light of the authority exercised by the provincial governors and the weakness of the Assyrian kings, it is possible that two features of the book of Jonah which have long been considered inappropriate to an Assyrian setting may in fact reflect accurately events which occurred during the first half of the eighth century. Thus the issuing of a decree by the king and his nobles (3:7) would seem highly possible given the factors observed above. Similarly, in view of the unstable political situation of this period, the designation 'king of Nineveh', in contrast to the more usual title 'king of Assyria', may not be wholly inappropriate.

Assyria's decline was eventually arrested when Tiglath-pileser III (745/44-727/26) seized control of the throne from Ashur-nirari V. Under his firm leadership the nation once more established itself as the major power in the ancient Near

¹ Wiseman, 'Jonah's Nineveh', pp. 42-51.

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Significantly, he adopted a new policy towards those nations who opposed Assyria: 'total conquest, accompanied by the deportation of the populations and the establishment of Assyrian provinces under an Assyrian administration'.¹ It was as a result of these measures that the northern kingdom of Israel was eventually to suffer the destruction of its capital, Samaria, and the deportation of its population. Although the siege of the city commenced in 724, during the reign of Shalmaneser V (727/26-722), it is Sargon II (722/21-705/4) who claims its capture:

At the beginning of my royal rule . . . I besieged and conquered Samaria, led away as booty 27,290 inhabitants of it. I formed from among them a contingent of 50 chariots and made remaining (inhabitants) assume their (social) positions. I installed over them an officer of mine and imposed upon them the tribute of the former king.²

Thus the nation of Assyria, to whom the prophet Jonah had been divinely sent, was subsequently responsible for the total destruction of his homeland. The early readers of the book could hardly have failed to notice the irony.

IV. PURPOSE

Jonah is first and foremost a didactic work. As the majority of modern commentators emphasize, the author of this remarkable book was intent on educating his audience, and not merely on entertaining them. Consequently, it is important to ask, What lesson (or lessons) does he wish to teach?

To answer this it is best to begin by surveying how others have understood the 'message' of the book. Although an amazing variety of opinions exist, these fall into four broad categories. By examining each in turn we may be in a better position to appreciate the purpose of Jonah.

A. Repentance

Writers from all ages have noted the importance of repentance in the book of Jonah. Indeed in Jewish tradition, Jonah, together with the final three verses of Micah, forms part of the ritual on the Day of Atonement when Jews in repentance

¹ Grayson, 'Assyria', p. 409.

² ANET, pp. 284-285.

confess their sins to God. Yet even among those who agree that repentance is the main theme of Jonah, there is a wide range of opinion as to the precise purpose of the book. Jerome suggested that Jonah was composed to encourage Jews to repent.¹ If pagan sailors and wicked Ninevites respond with repentance to prophetic preaching, Jewish hearers ought to do likewise. Kimchi, the twelfth-century Jewish commentator, adopted this view, and more recently C. A. Keller, Landes and H. Gevaryahu have each advocated a similar approach.² On the other hand, Clements has argued that the book of Jonah was intended to *show the possibility* of human repentance leading to a subsequent change in divine plans; both man and God may experience a similar change of heart.³ Jonah, for his part, represents those who reject the view that God may alter a decree which has already been announced.

According to Y. Kaufmann, Jonah originated in the middle of the eighth century BC as the *classical formulation* of the Israelite concept of repentance.⁴ With Jonah a major innovation occurred, for previously repentance had played no part in the religious thought of Israel. Jonah, typifying those who believed that all sin must be punished, is unable to accept God's willingness to forgive those who repent. A somewhat similar position is adopted by J. Walton, who suggests that the book of Jonah formed a *bridge* between the pre-classical (e.g. Elijah, Elisha) and classical prophets (e.g. Amos, Hosea).⁵ Jonah sees himself as standing in the tradition of the pre-classical prophets, whose pronouncements were viewed as irrevocable, and is unwilling to readjust when called to act as a classical prophet whose pronouncement would be set aside if repentance was forthcoming. By highlighting Jonah's dilemma the author indicates that repentance is the correct response to the pronouncements of the classical prophets. Repentance also figures prominently in the view of E. J.

¹ Jerome, 'Commentariorum in Iona[m] Prophetam', *Corpus Christianorum*, (Series Latina) 76 (1969), pp. 376-419.

² C. A. Keller, *Joel, Abdias, Jonas*, Book of, pp. 488-491; H. Gevaryahu, 'The Universalism of the Book of Jonah', *Dor le Dor* 10 (1981), pp. 20-27.

³ Clements, 'The Purpose of the Book of Jonah', pp. 16-28.

⁴ Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. and abridged M. Greenberg (University of Chicago, 1960), pp. 282-286.

⁵ Walton; cf. Porten, 'Baalshamem and the Date of Jonah', pp. 237-244.

Bickerman that Jonah was composed to *counter* the belief, that repentance guaranteed popular in post-exilic Judaism, that repentance underlines the fact that divine forgiveness.¹ The book of Jonah underlines the fact that God shows mercy because he is a compassionate sovereign by God shows mercy because he is not automatically merited by Creator; forgiveness is not automatically merited by repentance.

Although repentance is indeed a major theme in Jonah, a variety of considerations suggest that we must look elsewhere for the purpose of the book. The traditional view, that Jonah was composed to encourage Jews to repent, fails to account for the inclusion of chapter 4 within the account: had the book been designed to promote repentance, it would surely have been more appropriate to conclude the narrative at 3:10. Clements, Kaufmann and Walton explain the inclusion of chapter 4 by arguing that this episode brings to a climax Jonah's outright rejection of the doctrine of repentance on the part of man or God. Yet the assumption of these scholars that Jonah was quite unfamiliar with the concept of repentance must surely be questioned in view of Jonah's confession in 4:2, 'I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.' Citing Exodus 34:6, Jonah clearly acknowledges the divine privilege to forgive sins and relent from sending punishment. Jonah does not object to the doctrine of repentance *per se*, rather, as we shall argue below, he objects to the Ninevites being the recipients of divine forgiveness.

Nor is the alternative proposal of Bickerman less problematic. If the book was directed against those who thought divine forgiveness an automatic consequence of repentance, we would surely have expected the author to portray Jonah as adopting this very position. As it is, the book actually criticizes Jonah for opposing God's gracious response to the repentance of the Ninevites. Bickerman's interpretation is much too elusive.

B. Unfulfilled prophecy

G. Emerson and J. Licht have suggested that the book examines the problem of a prophet who *lacks authentication* due

¹ E. J. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (Schocken Books, 1967), pp. 3-49; trans. from his 'Les deux erreurs du prophète Jonas', pp. 232-264.

to the non-fulfilment of his prophecy.¹ Jonah fears that he will be termed a false prophet because his pronouncement against Nineveh remains unfulfilled (*cf.* Dt. 18:22, 'If that which I say or come true, his message is not from the Lord does not take place a narrative emphasizes the conditional nature of the pronouncements').

Towards the end of the last century, F. Hitzig, proposed that Jonah was meant to *justify the non-fulfilment* of divine prophecies.² Jonah illustrates how God could indeed revoke already pronounced judgment. Refining this proposal, Feuillet limited the scope of such unfulfilled prophecies to those addressed against Gentile nations.³ The narrative was intended to explain why some prophecies against foreign nations had remained unfulfilled; such pronouncements were not, as had been assumed, absolute in nature, but rather conditional.

According to A. Rofé, Jonah examines the relationship between conditional and unconditional prophecy, and, in so doing, reflects a debate, which occurred during the exile period, between those who maintained the traditional view that every divine decree was absolute and those who advocated the more modern suggestion that all prophecy was ultimately conditional.⁴

These proposals, however, are not without objection. On the issue of 'lack of authentication', one might ask if this suggestion does full justice to the character of Jonah as portrayed in the book; is he merely worried about being viewed as a false prophet? Does the response of the Ninevites to Jonah's message not indicate beyond doubt that he is indeed a true prophet? And are we not to see the hand of God in such remarkable events, suggesting again that Jonah is divinely commissioned? Could it not also be argued, as E. M. Good suggests, that in one sense the prophecy of Jonah actually was fulfilled: Yet forty days and Nineveh

¹ G. I. Emerson, 'Another look at the Book of Jonah', *ET* 88 (1976), pp. 86–88; Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, pp. 121–124; this approach was also suggested by some earlier commentators; *e.g.* Rashi and Calvin.

² F. Hitzig, *Die zwölf kleinen Propheten*, Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum AT (Hirzel, 1863).

³ Feuillet, 'Les sources', pp. 161–186; *idem*, 'Le sens du livre de Jonas', *RB* 54 (1947), pp. 340–361.

⁴ Rofé, 'Classes in the Prophetic Stories', pp. 143–164.

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will be turned upside down.¹

If the book of Jonah was intended to justify the non-fulfilment of divine prophecies, various questions arise. Is it not strange that the term 'prophet' is never applied to Jonah? And could it not be argued that Jonah was quite unworthy of his calling, and therefore what befell him is most untypical? And what if the book is dated, as many suppose, after the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC? Would this not suggest to a later audience that the divine threat had indeed been carried out (even if somewhat belatedly)?

As for the suggestion that Jonah examines the relationship between conditional and unconditional prophecy, it is apparent from 4:2, as we have observed above, that Jonah himself recognizes that all prophecy is conditional; indeed the entire story presupposes this possibility.

These considerations suggest that the purpose of Jonah cannot be limited to the issue of unfulfilled prophecy. While the lack of fulfilment is a very real problem for Jonah, it is important to decide whether this is on account of his belief that *all* prophecy should be fulfilled, or due, in this instance, to the non-fulfilment of the prophecy against Nineveh. In the light of factors still to be considered, this latter possibility seems the more likely.

C. *Jewish attitudes towards Gentiles*

The relationship between Jews and Gentiles lies at the heart of two of the most popular interpretations of the book of Jonah. For Augustine, Luther and many modern writers, the narrative emphasizes the *missionary* concern of God, whose love and mercy was not limited to the Jews.² Through Jonah, God not only rebukes those who would confine his saving grace to the Jewish people, but he also forcefully demonstrates his real interest in the salvation of ignorant, sinful pagans. Alternatively, many nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have suggested that the book of Jonah was an attack on the Jewish

¹ Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, p. 48; *cf.* Wiseman, 'Jonah's Nineveh', pp. 48–49; see Commentary, p. 121.

² Augustine, *Epistularum*, CII, 6, 30–38; Luther, 'Lectures on Jonah', in H. C. Oswald (ed.), *Luther's Works*, 19 (Concordia, 1974), pp. 3–104; H. H. Rowley, *The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (Carey, 1945), p. 69; E. Haller *Die Erzählung von dem Propheten Jona*; Eybers, 'The Purpose of the Book of Jonah', pp. 211–222.

bigotry against Gentiles which surfaced in reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.¹ Thus the author of the book portrays the pagan sailors and Ninevites in order to counter the negative attitude adopted by his contemporaries. M. Burrows, refining this approach, suggests that the book was directed primarily against a religiously fanatical group of returning exiles who were extreme.

In the opinion of S. Goldman and G. von Rad, the book was designed to rebuke the *grudging attitude* of some Jews concerning God's willingness to forgive Gentiles,³ the book typifying those who adopt this stance, is condemned because he callously begrudges the Ninevites divine mercy and forgiveness. M. Delcor, on the other hand, suggests that the book addressed those who eagerly *anticipated the destruction* of the Gentile nations through the fulfilment of prophecies of doom.⁴ Various criticisms of these approaches should be noted. Clements queries the proposal that the book of Jonah was aimed at encouraging missionary activity:

Jonah is clearly in no way to be thought of as a missionary to Nineveh, and his actions are very different from those of the Jews of a later age . . . God's mercy which is tended to the people of Nineveh after their repentance and fasting is nowhere related to their embracing of the torah, their rejection of idolatry, their acceptance of the circumcision, nor even to so basic a feature as a confession that Yahweh the God of Israel is the only true God. It is within reach of the divine mercy, but such a broad assumption about Yahweh's dealings with nations is evident very much earlier in the literature of the Old Testament. It is itself it does not go as far as the promise that non-Israelite nations will know that Yahweh is God, as asserted by

¹ E. König, 'Jonah', *ADB*, vol. 2, cols. 744-753; Bewer, G. von Rad, *Die Propheten* (Laetare, 1950); B. S. Childs, 'Jonah: A Study in Old Testament Hermeneutics', *SJT* 11 (1958), pp. 53-61; O. Loretz, 'Herakunft und Sinn', pp. 18-29; Wolff (1975).

² Burrows, 'Literary Category', pp. 80-107.

³ S. Goldman, 'Jonah, Introduction and Commentary', in A. Cohen (ed.), *The Twelve Prophets* (Soncino, 1948), pp. 137-150; G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (Oliver and Boyd, 1965), pp. 289-292.

⁴ M. Delcor, 'Jonah' in *Les petits prophètes*, La sainte Bible 8:1 (Letouzey et Ané, 1961).

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Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. xlix 26; Ezek. xxxvi 36, 38; xxxvii 28).¹

While the book provides an example of God's dealing with some Gentiles, it can hardly be described as a tract designed to motivate missionary involvement.

Nor can the book be linked with certainty to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The entire story fails to raise any single example of those issues which we know deeply affected the relationships of Jews with non-Jews in the post-exilic period . . . The so-called separatism of Nehemiah and Ezra was not so much concerned with making a distinction between Jew and Gentile, a distinction which had existed in Israel in national terms for centuries, but with a division between Jews and those who laid claim to being Jews.²

On the issue of begrudging divine mercy to Gentiles we may note that this is indeed an important issue in the latter part of the book. However, Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh must be contrasted with his willingness to be cast into the sea in order to save the pagan sailors. We must distinguish carefully between Jonah's general view of Gentiles and his particular attitude to the Ninevites; it is the specific deliverance of Nineveh that angers Jonah.

The suggestion that the narrative attacked those who awaited with delight the fulfilment of prophecies against foreign nations is also fraught with difficulties. What part does the episode of Jonah's initial flight and deliverance play in this context? If Jonah is meant to represent those who rejoice in the destruction of Gentiles, why is he portrayed as unwilling to pronounce judgment on Nineveh? Would he not have delighted in the prospect of condemning such a pagan city?

It has been argued by U. Cassuto and S. D. Goitein that the book of Jonah is totally devoid of any antagonism between Jews and Gentiles.³ Yet the fact that attention is focused on Nineveh is surely significant. As is observed by Allen, 'To deny the foreignness of Nineveh is surely to underestimate the

¹ Clements, 'Purpose', p. 18.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³ U. Cassuto, 'Jonah', in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 9, cols. 268-273; Goitein, 'Some Observations', pp. 63-77.

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religious and psychological impact of the old Assyrian capital upon a community that had received the old Assyrian capital part of its religious heritage.¹ Nineveh the book of Nahum in a totally neutral light (*cf.* the book of Nahum as Na. 3:5-6). Yet although Jonah's antagonism towards Nineveh is obviously an important theme in the narrative, esp. does not, in itself, explain why the narrative was composed.

D. Theodicy

The suggestion that the story examines the relationship between divine justice and mercy has figured prominently in a number of recent discussions on Jonah. This idea, however, is not completely new, and its roots may be traced back to earlier writers. Kaufmann, for example, saw Jonah as the 'champion of divine justice'.² He is the voice of the ancient idea that sin must be punished.³

Under this general approach various points have been highlighted. According to Tribe, Jonah objects vehemently to a divine love which overlooks sin and allows evil to go unpunished.⁴ Interestingly, Tribe sees this as applying not only to Jonah's attitude towards God's forgiveness of Nineveh, but also to how he himself is treated. Good views Jonah as rebelling against the actions of an unreasonable God: 'What business has a God of justice turning on the mercy act at Nineveh?' For T. S. Warshaw the book provides three examples of divine mercy having precedence over retributive justice; apart from forgiving the Ninevites, God rescues Jonah from the sea, and later shelters him from the sun.⁵ On the other hand, Fretheim views Jonah as fundamentally concerned with the question of theodicy: 'Are God's compassionate actions just?'⁶ Can a righteous God possibly forgive the wicked inhabitants of Nineveh? Jonah, according to J. Craghan, emphasizes the absolute freedom of God to act graciously and mercifully towards those

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who are deserving of divine retribution.¹ God will not be bound by Jonah's attempt to restrict divine love by playing off righteousness against love. E. Levine suggests that Jonah is a philosophical text, examining the nature of justice.² What is the relationship between justice and repentance?

The relationship between justice and mercy is clearly an important theme in Jonah. Yet before leaving this issue, one further observation must be made. From his statement in 4:2, it is quite apparent that Jonah acknowledges the divine prerogative to exercise mercy. Indeed Jonah has already experienced, and gladly accepted, divine deliverance from death at sea (*cf.* 2:2-9). Throughout the story Jonah does not object to divine mercy or forgiveness as such, but rather to its recipient, the Ninevites; how can God possibly pardon this particular people?

Of the various proposals for the purpose of Jonah, it is apparent that there is little to choose between them; it is easy to see why no clear consensus has yet been reached. Having said this, however, the view that Jonah is ultimately concerned with justice and mercy has at least one major advantage over the others. While the other proposals rightly reflect important themes in the story, they can all be satisfactorily subsumed under the heading of theodicy.

In our survey we observed that Jonah's reaction to Nineveh does not reflect his attitude to Gentiles in general. To say that the Ninevites are representative of all Gentiles creates real difficulties in trying to determine the purpose of Jonah. It is the deliverance of Nineveh, and this alone, which is the cause of Jonah's dissatisfaction. This, however, prompts a further series of questions: Why should Jonah object so vehemently to Nineveh? What was there about this particular city that evoked such strong antagonism?

The most obvious response would be that Nineveh, as capital of the Assyrian Empire, was responsible for the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel (*cf.* 2 Ki. 17:1-23). This explains Jonah's antipathy for Nineveh; he perceives the eventual outcome of his mission and passionately feels that he cannot be party to something which would

¹ Allen, p. 190; *cf.* T. F. Glasson, 'The Final Question in Nahum and Jonah', *ET* 81 (1969), pp. 54-55.

² Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, p. 285.

³ Tribe, *Studies in the Book of Jonah*, p. 273-279.

⁴ Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, pp. 39-55.

⁵ T. S. Warshaw, 'The Book of Jonah', in K. R. R. Gros Louis, J. S. Ackerman, T. S. Warshaw (eds.), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Abingdon, 1974), pp. 191-207.

⁶ T. E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah: idem, 'Jonah and Theodicy', ZAW*

90 (1978), pp. 227-237; *cf.* Ackerman, 'Satire and Symbolism', pp. 213-246.

¹ Craghan, pp. 164-193.

² E. Levine, 'Jonah as a Philosophical Book', *ZAW* 96 (1984), pp. 235-245.

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ultimately mean the destruction of his own nation,¹ How God possibly pardon these pagan Ninevites and then destroy Israel? For Jonah God's action is incomprehensible, and so initially he seeks to evade his calling.

There is no escape from God, however. Redemptive, slightest sign of protest, the entire city, clothed in sackcloth, seeks forgiveness. Jonah's worst fears are realized; God relents from his punishment of the city. Outside the city, Jonah still has punished them? What had Nineveh ever done to deserve such mercy? For Jonah, death is now preferable to life.

God responds to Jonah's impudence, however, by graciously providing a plant to shade him from the heat of the day. But Jonah's relief is short-lived, for within a day God sends a worm to kill the plant. Again Jonah reacts in anger. Has God no mercy? Must he act in such an uncaring, thoughtless way?

Having passed judgment on God's handling of these situations, Jonah is now taken to task. God pities Nineveh, but destroyed the plant. Jonah, on the other hand, pities the plant, but demanded the destruction of Nineveh. At odds with justice and mercy as functioning for their own convenience, mercy for themselves, but justice for their enemies. Fortunately, however, these attributes are not directed by human motives or desires. As the book of Jonah makes plainly obvious, God is sovereign, his justice is totally impartial, and his mercy may extend to anyone.

The destruction of Samaria in 721 BC by the Assyrians and the subsequent deportation of the ten northern tribes must have raised many questions and doubts in the minds of God's people. How could God allow the Assyrians to do this? Was this actually part of his sovereign will? Did Israel really deserve such harsh treatment? The book of Jonah offers a very relevant response to these issues. By focusing on the issue of theodicy, it addressed those who, like Jonah, questioned the wisdom of God's sovereign purpose at this time. In the light

¹Jerome comments, 'He knew, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that the repentance of the Gentiles would be the ruin of the Jews, and, as a lover of his country, was actuated not so much by envy of the Jews, and, as a lover of as by unwillingness that his own people should perish' (quoted by C. F. Kell, p. 391).

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of this, it seems reasonable to date the composition of the book towards the end of the eighth century BC, when the issue of God's dealings with Israel and Assyria would have been of major interest.

V. THE SIGN OF JONAH

In Matthew 12:38 Jesus is approached by some Pharisees and teachers of the law who demand of him a miraculous sign. In response Jesus informs them that the only sign they shall receive will be 'the sign of the prophet Jonah' (12:39). Matthew 16:1-4 records a similar incident, although on this occasion it involves a group of Pharisees and Sadducees. Again Jesus tells them that the only sign they will get is 'the sign of Jonah'. Luke also provides an account which contains the same basic elements as the first of the Matthean episodes, but in a slightly different order (Lk. 11:29-32).

What Jesus meant by 'the sign of Jonah' is not immediately obvious, and detailed study of the issue has generated a number of possible solutions. A helpful summary of the ways in which the sign of Jonah has been interpreted is provided by J. Jeremias.¹ Dismissing several less likely solutions, he focuses on the two most commonly suggested possibilities: the sign of Jonah refers to either (1) the preaching of Jonah or (2) his deliverance from the belly of the great fish.

A. The preaching of Jonah

Beginning with Luke 11:29-32 it is argued that the sign of Jonah refers to his preaching to Nineveh. Confirmation of this is found in verse 32, which focuses on the response of the Ninevites to Jonah's message: 'The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here' (cf. Matt. 12:41). Thus, it is suggested, the only sign which Jesus will give to his contemporaries is the summons to repentance which forms the

¹J. Jeremias, 'Jonas', *TDNT* III, pp. 408-410; for a fuller discussion of the redaction history of these passages, see R. A. Edwards, *The Sign of Jonah in the Theology of the Evangelists and Q*, Studies in Biblical Theology, 2nd series, 18 (SCM Press, 1971).

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basis of his preaching.¹

Although this view has enjoyed considerable support, are a number of factors which weigh heavily against it, it is unlikely that the preaching of repentance would have been considered a sign. As Jeremias comments, 'It is highly unusual to describe the preaching of repentance as a *semeion*, since a sign consists, not in what men do, but in "the intervention of the power of God in the course of events"'.² Secondly, in Matthew 12:40 and Luke 11:30 Jesus states that the sign will be given in the future. Yet from the very beginning of his public ministry Jesus had already been summoning people to repent; this, therefore, can hardly be the future sign which he envisages. Thirdly, P. Seidelin observes that at this time Jewish interest in the book of Jonah focused principally on the initial two chapters of the book rather than on the account of Jonah's activities in Nineveh which comes in chapter three.³ Finally, this interpretation of the sign requires the deletion of Matthew 12:40 as a later addition to the text. Although there is some support for this proposal, the evidence is not completely compelling.⁴

B. *Jonah's deliverance from the belly of the fish*

If the sign of Jonah does not refer to the preaching of repentance, then another possibility is that it refers to the miraculous deliverance of Jonah from death by means of the great fish. This is certainly the emphasis of Matthew 12:40: 'For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.' Here Jesus draws a comparison between the experience of Jonah and his own future resurrection from the dead; like Jonah, he too will appear alive after three days. Some writers see a difficulty here in that Jesus seems to adopt a negative understanding of Jonah's stay within the fish, whereas in the book of Jonah the fish is actually represented as the means of deliverance from death. However, it needs to be

¹ Cf. A. D. Martin, *The Prophet Jonah: The Book and the Sign* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), pp. 69-82; Scott, 'The Sign of Jonah', pp. 17-18.

² Jeremias, 'Jonas', p. 409.

³ P. Seidelin, 'Das Jonazeichen', *Studia Theologica* 5 (1951), pp. 119-131, esp. p. 130.

⁴ The arguments against the deletion of Mt. 12:40 are ably presented by R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Tyndale Press, 1971), pp. 80-82.

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emphasized that the correspondence between Jonah's experience and that of Jesus is not exact. Jonah, unlike Jesus, does not actually die; he merely experiences a very close encounter with death. It is therefore important not to push the parallels too far. Jesus draws attention to the fact that he, like Jonah, will reappear alive after three days.

According to Jeremias, what Jesus has in mind is 'the authorisation of the divine messenger by deliverance from death'.¹ This suggestion, however, presents a problem, because it is nowhere suggested in the book of Jonah that his deliverance from death was a factor in persuading the Ninevites to repent. On the contrary, Jonah was convinced from the very outset that the Ninevites would respond favourably to his message (cf. 4:2); indeed it was this very fear which caused him to flee to sea, setting in motion the series of events which led to his being cast overboard. Although Jesus refers here to his being raised from the dead after a period of three days, the significance of this does not lie in the 'authorisation of the divine messenger'.

As the above discussion reveals, Jesus is able to make several comparisons between Jonah and himself: both preach repentance; both reappear alive after three days. There are, however, two other similarities which are worth noting. Firstly, neither of the above interpretations takes into account the context in which Jesus mentions the sign of Jonah. In each of the three instances in which the sign is mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus describes those who demand a sign as either 'a wicked and adulterous generation' (Mt. 12:39; 16:4) or 'a wicked generation' (Lk. 11:29). Jesus' response to their request possibly indicates that the only sign they will receive will be one denoting judgment. In this connection it is interesting to observe that Jonah's mission to Nineveh ultimately resulted in disaster for Israel. Is Jesus indicating here that just as Jonah's mission led to the deliverance of Gentiles and the destruction of Israel, so too will his own (cf. Lk. 19:42-44; Rom. 11:11-15)?

Secondly, about this time some Jews possibly saw in the book of Jonah an example of a prophet sacrificing his own life in order to save others. This idea obviously underlies the following remark from Mekhilta Exodus, 12:1: 'R. Jonathan

¹ Jeremias, 'Jonas', p. 409.

[c. 140 AD] said: The only purpose of Jonah was to bring judgment on himself in the sea, for it is written: "And he said to them, Take me and cast me into the sea." And he said to himself, you find that many patriarchs and prophets sacrificed themselves for Israel. In the light of this understanding of Jonah, Jesus could also be alluding to the fact that his own death will take the form of a substitutionary sacrifice.¹ Clearly it is possible to draw a number of parallels between Jesus' experience and that of Jonah. Maybe it is a mistake to restrict 'the sign of Jonah' to any one of these; perhaps we ought to see in Jesus' reference a combination of some, if not all, of the factors mentioned above.

VI. THE TEXT OF JONAH

The most recently printed edition of the Hebrew text of Jonah is that edited by K. Elliger in *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (1970). This reproduces the text of Jonah found in the Leningrad Codex, which, according to its colophon, was copied in AD 1008 from a text prepared by the famous Tiberian textual scholar Aaron ben Moses ben Asher. The Leningrad Codex is but one of a number of surviving medieval codices produced by Jewish biblical scholars, known as Massoretes, who were keen to preserve the original text, and pronunciation, of the Hebrew Bible.²

Since 1947 the discovery of various caches of ancient documents along the western shore of the Dead Sea has provided further evidence concerning the text of Jonah. Of particular significance was the recovery in March 1955 of a manuscript of the Twelve (Minor) Prophets from a small cave in Wadi Marubba'at. This scroll, copied shortly prior to AD 135, confirms that the Hebrew text of Jonah was carefully preserved by the Massoretes. But for a few minor differences in

¹ Cf. J. Woodhouse, 'Jesus and Jonah', *Reformed Theological Review* 43 (1984), pp. 33-41, esp. p. 40.

² There are three codices containing the text of Jonah which are slightly older than the Leningrad: the Cairo Codex on the Prophets (AD 895); the Petersburg Codex on the Prophets (AD 916); the Aleppo Codex (c. AD 925); cf. E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (SCM Press, 1980), pp. 34-35. For a discussion of the relative merits of these codices, see M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, 'The Rise of the Tiberian Bible Text', in A. Altman (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies* (Harvard, 1963), pp. 79-122; *idem*, 'The Aleppo Codex and the Rise of the Massoretic Bible Text', *BA* 42 (1979), pp. 145-163.

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orthography, this text is identical to that of the best medieval manuscripts.¹ Early translations into Greek, Aramaic, Syriac and Latin also provide evidence regarding the text of Jonah. When allowance is made for some freedom in translation, it is apparent that these ancient versions were based on a Hebrew text identical to that preserved by the Massoretes.² Where these versions do diverge from the Hebrew it is generally accepted that they do not provide a superior reading. For example, the important fourth-century AD Greek manuscripts Vaticanus and Sinaiticus omit in 1:8 the phrase, 'Who is responsible for our trouble?' (cf. NEB). A. Rahlfs and J. Ziegler, in their critical editions of the LXX, both conclude that the shorter Greek reading is inferior; the phrase was accidentally omitted due to homocoteleuton (i.e. a Greek copyist unfortunately jumped in the verse from the first occurrence of *hemim* to the next).³ Similar explanations account for other differences. There is therefore no compelling textual evidence to suggest that the Massoretic text of Jonah ought to be emended.

Having said this, however, some scholars argue on other grounds that it is necessary in a few instances to emend the Hebrew text. Thus a number of purely conjectural emendations have been proposed. For example, a number of commentators suggest that the last clause of 1:10, 'because he had already told them', is out of sequence chronologically and ought, therefore, to be deleted as a gloss.⁴ Yet there is no textual evidence to suggest that the authenticity of the phrase should be doubted, and it is possible to make sense of the Hebrew as it now stands.⁵ Thus although various emendations have been suggested, the present form of the

¹ P. Benoit, J. T. Milik and R. de Vaux, *Les Grottes de Murabba'at: Textes, Discoveries in the Judean Desert II* (Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 50, 69, 181-184, 190-191, 205.

² Cf. Tribble, pp. 1-65, esp. 57-65.

³ A. Rahlfs, *Septuaginta*, II (Privilegierte Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1935); J. Ziegler, *Septuaginta: vol. XIII, Duodecim Prophetae* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1943). In favour of the Greek reading it has been argued that the phrase under consideration was introduced into the Hebrew text by a copyist who erroneously repeated an almost identical phrase in v. 7. For arguments to the contrary, see Allen, p. 209, n. 31.

⁴ Cf. Bewer, p. 37; Smart, p. 883; Tribble, p. 89.

⁵ Cf. N. Lohfink, 'Jona ging zur Stadt hinaus', pp. 193-195; Keller, p. 275, n. 1; Wolff (1975), p. 42; Allen, p. 210, n. 37.

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text presents few real difficulties. Indeed there is widespread agreement that the text of Jonah has been remarkably well preserved.

ANALYSIS

- I. JONAH AT SEA (1:1-2:10)
 - A. Jonah's initial call (1:1-3)
 - B. Jonah and the sailors (1:4-16)
 - C. Jonah's gratitude for his own deliverance (1:17-2:10)
- II. JONAH AT NINEVEH (3:1-4:11)
 - A. Jonah's second call (3:1-3)
 - B. Jonah and the Ninevites (3:4-10)
 - C. Jonah's anger at Nineveh's deliverance (4:1-11)

COMMENTARY

I. JONAH AT SEA (1:1 - 2:10)

A. Jonah's initial call (1:1-3)
With remarkable simplicity of style and a minimum of words, the author of Jonah quickly captures our attention by skilfully juxtaposing Jonah's divine commission to go to Nineveh with his flight to Tarshish. Specific details are kept to a minimum, yet sufficient information is provided to enable the reader to grasp immediately the opening scene.

1. For the original Hebrew audience, the story starts in a most conventional manner. The expression *The word of the Lord came to . . .* introduces a divine communication to a prophet in over one hundred instances in the Old Testament. What follows is usually the message which the prophet is to deliver (e.g. Joel 1:1; Mi. 1:1; Zp. 1:1; Hg. 1:1; Zc. 1:1; Mal. 1:1). Sometimes, however, it introduces specific instructions for the prophet (e.g. 2 Sa. 7:4; 1 Ki. 17:2, 8; 21:17). Such is the case here.

The recipient of this divine communication is named as *Jonah son of [ben] Amittai*. Unfortunately the text is silent about his background. There is, however, good reason to assume that he is the prophet mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. On the basis of this latter passage various observations may be made. Firstly, he is portrayed as being active during the reign of Jeroboam II, who was king of the northern kingdom of Israel from 782/81 to 753 bc. This enables us to date the events concerning Nineveh to the first half of the eighth century bc. Jonah was thus a contemporary of the prophets Amos and Hosea. That the book of Jonah contains no date formula has been taken by some scholars to indicate that the author did not intend his narrative to be taken literally. It may be, however, that he saw no reason to specify precisely when these events occurred (cf. 1 Ki. 17:2). Secondly, Jonah is described

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AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY
by

DAVID W. BAKER, A.B., M.C.S., M.PHIL., PH.D.
*Associate Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew,
Ashland Theological Seminary, Ohio*

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AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY
by

T. DESMOND ALEXANDER, B.A., PH.D.
Lecturer in Semitic Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast

MICAH

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY
by

BRUCE K. WALTKE, B.A., TH.D., PH.D.
*Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary,
Philadelphia*

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